

From the Lexington Herald Leader, Tuesday, March 31, 2009

<http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/story/744782.html>

Fla. legislator attempts to plug a pain-pill pipeline

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Florida State Rep. Kelly Skidmore has seen it firsthand.

"Countless cars with Kentucky license plates lined up outside Florida pain clinics waiting their turn to pick up handfuls of pill bottles—as easy as picking up a Big Mac at a fast-food drive-through," she said in a statement.

Skidmore is one of several officials in both states who are stepping up efforts to sever a pipeline that enables Kentuckians to abuse and sometimes sell prescription drugs that they obtain legally in the sunshine state.

She has sponsored a bill authorizing a prescription-drug monitoring system. The lack of such a program has made Florida the place that people from 38 states that do have such programs go to get their drugs, says Skidmore, D-Boca Raton.

The programs allow officials to track the number of narcotics prescriptions written for a patient and where they are filled.

Virgil Clay Ritchie, of Carlisle, Ky., suffers from pain caused by injuries in two motorcycle accidents. He told the Herald-Leader it was entirely legal when he traveled from Kentucky to a Florida clinic in February to get a prescription for painkillers.

But Ritchie, 54, is now one of those calling for legislators like Skidmore to shut down a system in which Florida physicians can hand patients monthly prescriptions for hundreds of pills.

"They are killing people. I could see what they were doing to me," said Ritchie, who decided not to fill his February prescription. Instead, Ritchie brought the prescription to Lexington to show it to physician Ben Huneycutt and to ask Huneycutt to treat his withdrawal from painkillers.

Kentucky Lt. Gov. Daniel Mongiardo wrote to Florida House Speaker Larry Cretul on March 20, encouraging him to support Skidmore's bill.

The Kentucky All Schedule Prescription Electronic Reporting system, commonly known by the acronym KASPER, is comprehensive and effective, Mongiardo wrote.

But he said Kentucky continues to have a problem with people traveling to other states to doctor shop.

"Interstate issues remain because controlled substance abuse problems transcend state borders, thus increasing the likelihood of interstate doctor shopping in the 12 states without prescription monitoring programs," Mongiardo wrote.

Florida has the top 25 doctors dispensing oxycodone in the United States, according to Skidmore.

On March 9, Broward County, Fla., prosecutors asked a grand jury to investigate the increasing number of South Florida pain clinics, according to published reports. The number of clinics has doubled to 130 just since August.

That same day, nine Kentuckians and a former Florida doctor were sentenced in U.S. District Court in Kentucky for taking part in a conspiracy to distribute oxycodone pills. Several of the Kentucky defendants went to Florida numerous times from January 2007 to January 2008 to get prescriptions from Roger Browne, 52, a former doctor in Coral Springs, Fla., according to court documents.

A search of Browne's office turned up files for 500 patients in six Eastern Kentucky counties. He admitted at a plea hearing in November that he "knew there was a high probability the pills would be distributed illegally in Kentucky."

Judge David L. Bunning sentenced Browne to 30 months, with three years of supervised release. The Kentuckians all received lesser sentences.

Ritchie, meanwhile, said many people from Kentucky travel each month to any one of dozens of clinics in Florida. He said the people he knows have legitimate pain and are not selling the drugs. Some, he said, have developed addictions and cannot get the medicine as easily in Kentucky.

Ritchie said he paid \$275 for an MRI and another \$135 for a doctor's visit in a Broward County clinic before getting a month's worth of prescriptions. In addition to Xanax, he received 300 tablets of Roxicodone, some 30-milligram and some 15-milligram tablets. Roxicodone is the brand name for oxycodone, a painkiller that is widely abused in Kentucky.

Ritchie said the clinic sent him to a nearby pharmacy to fill the prescription. A police officer who told Ritchie he was watching people come and go at the clinic pulled Ritchie's vehicle over on a traffic stop near the pharmacy and questioned him about the prescription. Ritchie said he had done nothing wrong and was not charged.

But he said he made a decision then and there to wean himself from the prescription drugs that eased the pain in his back.

"I quit cold turkey," he said.

Huneycutt, the Lexington physician, said he had several recent patients who have travelled to Florida, either by themselves or in a van with other Kentuckians, to obtain large quantities of pain medications.

Huneycutt said patients tell him the pain clinics do not accept insurance, have their own pharmacists and MRI capabilities, and do not require documentation.

"This is a huge concern for our community and for our state, since Florida does not have a KASPER system, and a tremendous amount of these medications are hitting our neighborhood streets," Huneycutt said.

Florida isn't the only place Kentucky residents have gone to get prescription drugs, often with little or no examination.

Randy Weiss, who pleaded guilty March 19 in another federal case, admitted that he began writing improper methadone prescriptions at a Philadelphia clinic in 2005 for people from Pike and Floyd counties, 10 hours away.

Weiss said more than 100 people from Kentucky came to the clinic, paying \$500 cash to get prescriptions. A number of them had false MRI results in their files, Weiss said. A doctor and pharmacist in Cincinnati have been charged in the same conspiracy.

In Florida, Skidmore continues to work for the passage of her bill: "We need to work with our friends in Kentucky and elsewhere," she said, "to put a stop to this problem once and for all."

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